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For
John David La Touche
&c &c &c
from his obliged friend
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ESSAY

ON THE

INFLUENCE OF FICTITIOUS HISTORY

ON

MODERN MANNERS.

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ESSAY

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INFLUENCE OF FICTITIOUS HISTORY

ON

MODERN MANNERS.

" Of power to cheat the eye with blear illusion,
And give it false presentments . . . . .
I, under fair pretence of friendly ends,
And well placed words of glozing courtesy,
Baited with reasons not unplausible,
Wind me into the easy-hearted man,
And hug him into snares. MILTON'S COMUS.

AT a period when so many works of imagination issue from the press, every day giving birth to some new fiction, it appears particularly seasonable, that a question, relative to the influence such productions may have on the manners of the present age, should be instituted by an academy, whose object has ever been the investigation of truth, and the ad-

vancement of science; and at the same time that I presume to offer my sentiments upon the subject proposed, to the notice of the academy, I would bespeak its indulgence—that "*χαρις μικροισι*," which only the wise, and the learned, are capable of affording.

The power which fiction, from the remotest antiquity, has usurped over the human mind, must be evident even to him who is but little acquainted with the history of mankind—but accurately to ascertain *how much* is to be ascribed to *it*, rather than to other co-existent and powerful causes, is a task that involves in it considerable difficulty, a difficulty that will be found to apply even to those times, when the influence of fiction must have been most felt; when it was sought for with the greatest avidity, and received with the most universal delight.

Before I enter on the more immediate subject of this essay, which relates merely to modern times, it will be agreeable, and I hope, will not be considered unnecessary, to take a brief view of the origin of fiction, and of its influence upon the manners and morals of the Greeks and Romans; should it be thought that, in so doing, I depart somewhat from the subject proposed, I desire to shield myself under the authority of Dr. Johnson, who says, "To judge rightly of the *present*, we must oppose it to the *past*, for all judgment is comparative." *

* Rasselas.

In the early heroic times, the warrior was accustomed to be roused by the songs of the bards, which reminded him of the heroic actions of his ancestors, and which, set to music, were impressed upon his memory, and were continually on his lips, whether he joined the choruses of his countrymen, or was in secret stimulated by them to deeds of fame. Thus Homer has introduced Achilles, sitting on the shore, and singing to his lyre.

"Τὸν δ' εὗρον φρένα τερπόμενον φορμιγγι λιγείῃ,
Καλῇ, δαιδαλέῃ, ἐπι δ' ἀργύρεος ζυγος ἦεν
Τὴν ἄρετ' ἐξ ἐνάρων, πτολιν Ἠετιωνος ὀλέσσας·
Τῇ ὄγε θυμὸν ἔτερπεν, ἀειδε δ' ἄρα κλέα ἀνδρῶν." Il. ix.

And in a later age, we find Tyrtæus animating the Spartans, and leading them to battle, by the divine influence of his poetry, in which he sung the renown of ancient warriors, and set before them the rewards of valour; victory, and its attendants, glory and honour. We also find Solon employing the same means to excite the Athenians to make war upon the Megareans; a subject, the bare mention of which, in sober prose, and stripped of the embellishments of fiction, would have incurred the penalty of death.

But the poets, as they proceeded to study nature more intimately, and to seek the most powerful causes of things, finding that the relation of human actions merely, however illustrious, was insufficient for their purpose, sought the intervention of supernatural agency. Men of such a profes-

sion as theirs had little to do with the reason and sober judgment of their hearers. The imagination, and the passions, were to be wrought upon, for "there is something in the mind of man, sublime and elevated, which prompts it to overlook all obvious and familiar appearance, and to feign to itself, other, and more extraordinary." * Accordingly, the actions of several persons are attributed to *one*, and those actions adorned with every circumstance that could make them interesting, or excite to emulation; and that the glory resulting from them might never be forgotten, or their benefits lost to mankind, the hero who achieved them is exalted into the assembly of the divinities, to watch over his favoured votaries, to infuse into their hearts his undaunted spirit, and to give strength and energy to their bodies. It cannot be doubted that to the fictions of the poets may be ascribed, in a great degree, the undaunted, and warlike spirit of the first ages.

Equally striking are the effects of those fictions upon their morals. The poets, ignorant of the true God, and of the Unity of the Divine perfections, divided amongst a number of separate beings, what they imagined were the attributes of deity; † and in the creation of such imaginary beings, hav-

* Hurd's Dissertations.

† The Pelasgians (according to Herodotus,) sacrificed and prayed to gods to whom they gave no name, or distinguishing appellation, it was therefore the poets that introduced the belief of those numerous deities, and their names.

MITFORD's Grecian History, vol. i. p. 88.

ing no other standard to direct their fancies, were obliged to enlarge the idea of some human creature, and at the same time that they magnified his virtues, could not avoid magnifying also his vices. Hence, we are presented with the most disgusting representations of every kind of vice in the actions of the heathen divinities. It is not the furies with their snakes, or the abominable harpies that excite our abhorrence; no, it is the great God, that wields the thunder-bolt, and at whose nod the earth trembles! when we behold him, exerting his omnipotence for the purpose of gratifying the most disgraceful passions, and for the perpetration of the most shocking crimes;—it is the goddess of beauty, whose magical charms awaken love and admiration in the bosoms of gods and men; when we behold her, instead of presenting those modest charms, and that chaste deportment, which give to beauty its highest perfection, displaying the wanton and indelicate manners of an abandoned courtesan. We may learn from a passage in Terence, how great encouragement to dissoluteness those fictions were, in which was depicted the immoral conduct of the gods: for we find a young man declaring with what greater willingness he was induced to commit a crime, when accidentally reminded, that he was authorised by the example of the great God himself.

"At quem Deum? qui templa cœli summa sonitu concutit.
Ego homuncio hoc non facerem? ego illud vero ita feci, ac lubens."

The scenes that were exhibited in the temples at the celebration of some of the festivals, and the orgies of Bacchus, are instances of the same kind, that cannot be thought of without horror.

It is remarkable that the Roman people were eminent for their virtue and chastity, until the time that Greece was subdued by their arms. Five hundred years had elapsed, from the foundation of their city, before a divorce was known at Rome; but as soon as this event took place, which was about the time the Romans began to have intercourse with the Greeks, the change in their manners is apparent, and this change may be very well referred, at least in a considerable degree, to the introduction of the fictions of the Grecian Mythology, so that in this respect, as much as in the arts, may it be said, "Græcia capta ferum victorem cepit."

Those law-givers, who annexed such severe punishments to the breach of the conjugal vow, certainly adopted at the same time the most effectual method of preventing it, by erecting temples to chastity. Agreeably to this, we find Numa, in order to make his people honest, transforming Bona Fides into a goddess, and building a temple to her worship; and perhaps it was owing to the want of such a device, in the Grecian law-givers, that Greek knavery forms such a contrast to Roman honesty; and if we enquire into the causes that made the Romans excel every other nation in the art and practice of war, we cannot avoid ascribing much im-

portance to the belief, that they were the children of Mars, and under his peculiar protection.

With respect to prose compositions, that rank under the class of fiction, there is reason to think that, generally speaking, they were unknown to the Greeks and Romans; however, we hear of the Milesian, Ionian, and Sybaritic Tales, and although they have perished, we know them to have been of a licentious and immoral nature; we know also, that these people were remarkable for effeminacy and immorality above all the other inhabitants of Greece or Italy. There is therefore *here* presumptive evidence, that their manners and morals were much influenced by fictitious writings, and vice versâ.

That the fictions of the poets contributed very much to that taste and refinement which characterised the Greeks more than any people that ever existed, cannot, I think, be denied, especially when we consider that it is only in proportion to his acquaintance with the writings in which these fictions are found, that we are accustomed to give any man the reputation of a refined and elegant scholar. It must be admitted that there were other causes beside these, for the superior elegance of the Greeks, but nothing could be devised more likely to produce it, than the machinery of the poets. In a rich and beautiful country, on which nature had profusely lavished her charms, it was impossible to turn where some poetical fancy was not presented to the mind: every meadow, and every grove abounded in its satyrs, and

hamadryads, and every fountain and river had its appropriate nymph or deity; a rosy-fingered goddess unbarred every morning the gates of the east, and they were closed in the evening by another more sombre, but not less interesting deity; in short, no spot could be visited, that was incapable of presenting to the view the most attractive and exquisite imagery.*

But the Greeks, as is always the case, with their independance, lost also their mental superiority among the nations, and their genius and energies were left buried among the ruins of their country.

If we again turn our eyes toward Italy, we shall find that the subjugation of the Greeks changed as well the manners, as the morals, of their conquerors. The rough and brutal manners of the old Roman were, by degrees, lost in the refinement and elegance of the Greek. The Grecian writers exclusively occupied the attention of the Roman student, and their greatest geniuses aspired only to the glory of imitating them. For several ages, the Latin language had been adopted by the learned in every nation of Europe; but it was destined to undergo the fate of the Greek. About the beginning of the eighth century, the Arabians entering Spain, and establishing the seat of their empire at Cordova, changed the language of the country.

* See L'Introduction au Voyage du Jeune Anacharsis.

This period, the darkest of the European annals, was the time when Arabian literature was in its most flourishing state.

"The Saracens," (to use the words of Mr. Gibbon,) confident in the riches of their native tongue, and disdaining the study of any foreign idiom, deprived themselves of the principal benefit of a familiar intercourse with Greece and Rome, the knowledge of antiquity, purity of taste, and freedom of thought; so that there is no example of a poet, orator, or even historian, being taught to speak the language of the Saracens. Cordova, with a few adjacent towns, gave birth to more than three hundred writers, and a library was formed, that consisted of 600,000 volumes."* The effect of all this on the Europeans was what might have been with reason expected. A manuscript cited by Du Cange acquaints us, that the Spaniards, soon after the irruption of the Saracens, neglected the study of Latin, and captivated by the novelty of the oriental tales imported by the Saracens, suddenly adopted a pomp of stile, and an affected elevation of diction; and the ideal tales of these eastern invaders, recommended by a brilliancy of description, a variety of imagery and an exuberance of invention, were eagerly caught up, and universally diffused.† These tales passed over from Spain into France and Italy, and from thence to the north: and when the Europeans afterwards flocked in such numbers

* Roman Empire, vol. x.

† Warton's first Dissertation, Hist. English Poetry, vol. i.

around the standard of the cross, and "legions of poets" accompanied the armies to the Holy Land, religion and superstition, with their saints and dæmons, in those heterogeneous compositions, were engrafted with the eastern ideas of magic and dragons, and in course of time with the Gothic ideas of female excellence, and phantastic honour—to which may be added, the ideas of magnificence derived also from the east, the vast distance from whence, gave the greater force and credibility to their fictions.

Thus we find the Arabians uniting with the Scandinavians in forming a new and irregular species of composition, which was to be as various in its effects, as the characters and manners of the nations it embraced; and if, in taking this retrospect, we find that the purity of style, and delicacy of taste of the classic authors was thus for a season entirely lost, we shall have less reason to regret it when we reflect that a too servile imitation of those exquisite models, had they been more diffused, might have fettered genius, and restrained the sublime flights of untutored imagination; we may even presume that the empire of literature has on this account been extended and enlarged. *

* Mr. Warton very ingeniously reconciles his own hypothesis, namely, that the Arabians were the authors of romantic fiction in Europe, with that of the Bishop of Dromore, who derives it from the ancient songs of the Gothic bards and scalds; and with the testimony of Mons. Mallet, the Danish historian, who is of the same opinion. Mr. Warton brings forward many proofs of the eastern origin of some of the Scandinavian tribes: first, that they are said to have emigrated with their leader Odin, imme-

Having, as briefly as possible, considered the effects of fiction in general, upon the manners of the ancient Greeks and Romans; I come now to more modern times, and to enquire what influence is to be ascribed to those particular productions which rank under the denomination of romances and novels. I have already glanced at their origin, which is plainly oriental.

The term romance has been traced by Monsieur Huet to the Provençal Troubadours, who composed their songs in a language that was a mixture of Latin and Gallic, and on this account called romanz or romance; but although the bishop wrote expressly on the origin of that particular species of composition, to which they give the name, he has entirely relinquished the most important part of his subject (which would have been the romances of chivalry) contenting himself with giving a dry detail of the poems of the Provençal Troubadours, to which the others have hardly any other relation, than similarity of name.* From Mons. Huet, we obtain

diately after the overthrow of Mithridates, from the region of Asia, now called Georgia, and to have settled in Norway and Denmark: And secondly, the remarkable, and conspicuous similarity between many of the customs of the Asiatics, of the Georgians in particular, and those of the inhabitants of the north, even at this day.

WARTON's Hist. of English Poetry, vol. i.

* Mr. Warton is of opinion, that there were two sorts of French troubadours, that are not sufficiently distinguished: that the poetry of the first consisted of satires, moral fables, allegories, and sentimental sonnets; and that the latter class composed metrical romances, which formed a distinct species, and ought to be considered sepa-

little else than a list of these poems, and the names of some Greek authors, who flourished in the decline of the Roman Empire, amongst whom the most remarkable is Heliodorus, Bishop of Trica, who was deprived of his bishopric, for being the author of Theagenes and Chariclea, which was then supposed to have baneful effects upon the manners of youth, though it is not at present considered as having such a tendency.

The earliest specimens we have of romance, as it existed for a long period in Europe, are the histories of Arthur and Charlemagne, compiled, as is supposed, from ancient legends, by Geoffry of Monmouth, and Turpin, the monk, in the eleventh century, though some imagine them to be as old as the eighth. The high veneration in which these histories were held, and the enthusiasm which a bare recital of them was calculated in particular circumstances to produce, is demonstrated by a fact recorded in our own annals of the Minstrel Taillifer, who, at the battle of Hastings, advanced before William's army, singing the songs of Charlemagne and Roland.

These histories gave birth to innumerable others, but it was chivalry, and the croisades, that afforded the most abundant materials and encouragement to fictitious history.

rately; they seem to have commenced at a later period, and not until after the croisades had effected a great change in the manners and ideas of the western world.

The institution of chivalry was founded originally in principles of humanity and justice. When the different kingdoms of Europe were broken and divided into several smaller states; and when the weakness of the law had enabled the more powerful baron, without any risk to himself, to do violence to those whom age, profession, or sex, had rendered incapable of resisting him;—some kind of protection was required, more ready in its application, and more permanent in its effects, than what could be derived from the casual exertions of a neighbouring chieftain, however virtuous, or however courageous.

To redress some of the grievances that would naturally arise from such a state of society, was the object of the institution; an object worthy of admiration! nor can we avoid attributing a considerable degree of ingenuity to a scheme that was calculated to keep alive the martial spirit of the times, (which was then of the highest importance,) by the exercise of virtues, in all other cases so incompatible with it. For it was not merely the martial spirit that was cherished by this means; "Les preceptes," says Mons. de la Curne de Ste. Palaye,* "renfermès dans le serment de la Chevalerie, sont le germe de toute la morale repandue dans les Ouvrages de nos Poëtes, et de nos Romanciers:" And by paying some regard to those circumstances, we shall be tolerably well able to estimate the reciprocal importance of chivalry and ro-

* Memoires de l'Academie des Inscriptions, &c. Tom. xx.

mance. Chivalry was certainly the parent of romance; but the refinement and sentiments then new to the European world, which the institution of chivalry introduced, must have been necessarily confined to courts, and to the higher orders, for a much longer period than was actually the case, had not romance, in a manner, multiplied the number of knights, and presented as in a mirror, to all classes of society, the resemblance of what was acting in courts, and in camps, heightened generally by the enthusiasm of unfettered genius. The fact that it was to the old romances we are indebted for the most perfect information which has been afforded to us on the subject of chivalry, by Mons. de Ste. Palaye, who acknowledges that he derived it from them, is sufficient to make us view those productions in a light much less ridiculous than we have been accustomed to do; in the same manner as the exhibition of a lady and gentleman dressed according to the costume of those times would be highly interesting, notwithstanding the smile they might excite.

The truth and reality of the representations of the romance writers is also proved by a curious document preserved by Montfaucon,* which informs us that many of the romances of the fourteenth century owed their origin to a register which every knight was obliged to make of his yearly adventures, and to place in some castle: nor is this proof invalidated by

* Monumens de la Monarchie Française.

the enchanters, dragons, and other absurdities that were intermingled with the adventures; it is rather confirmed by them, as such was the popular belief of the times. In another point of view, the early romances must be considered important; they were the first productions written in the vernacular tongue, and were what first made learning popular. The Provençal writers led the way, by writing in a language intelligible to the ladies and common people: It was from them Dante formed his idea of writing his Inferno in Italian, and not, as he had originally intended, in Latin: To which circumstance may be traced the perfection of the Italian and of the other European languages.

Candour thus obliges us to regard the romances, as favourable to the progress of literature; at the same time it must be admitted, that they were made use of by the monks, the authors of most of them, to cherish a spirit of superstition and fanaticism, very inimical to it. Mons. de Ste. Palaye, further informs us that the object of the writers of romances was to excite to emulation; and had they been actuated by a spirit of genuine christianity, we might have seen the most beneficial consequences resulting from their influence;—but in all their compositions there was such a mixture of profaneness and immorality with religion, as could not fail of having the most injurious tendency: They inculcated beside, the ridiculous punctilio of defending women, even on occasions the most dishonourable—We must therefore differ from a learned

and judicious critic, * who considers those romances as compositions of the "truly moral and heroic kind;" had this been the case, they would not surely have excited the complaints, invectives, and sermons of the most excellent and zealous men in Europe. Beside, if we consider the grossness of the manners of those times, it is highly improbable that such writings would have been so eagerly caught up, and so universally admired, had they not been accommodated to the depraved taste of the readers. †

I might have thought it necessary, perhaps, to give further proofs of the dangerous consequences resulting from the old romances, and of the power which they possessed over the minds of persons of all descriptions, had not the great Cervantes, in his admirable Don Quixotte, exhausted every thing that could, or need, be said upon the subject; and demonstrated, by the success of his work, that no other mode of attack, than that which he adopted, would have been attended with equal success. It is remarkable that Cervantes had been anticipated by Chaucer, in his attempt to ridicule these productions, and also, in his manner of doing so. I shall be excused for quoting a passage from the Letters of Bishop Hurd, in which he makes us acquainted with the motives that induced our venerable poet to compose a Tale (the Rhyme of Sir Thopas,) at a period, when the manners of romance were almost realised. "We are to observe," says his lordship, "that this is Chaucer's own Tale, and that

* Dr. Blair. † Don. G. Mayan's Life of Cervantes.

in the progress of it, the good sense of the host is made to break in upon him, and interrupt him. Chaucer approves his disgust, and changing his note, tells the simple tale of Melibœus, *a moral tale, vertuous*, as he terms it, to shew what sort of fictions were most expressive of real life, and most proper to be put into the hands of the people. It is further to be noted, that the *Boke* of the Giant Oliphant, and Chyle, Thopas, was not a fiction of his own, but a story of antique frame, and very celebrated in the days of chivalry: so that nothing could better suit the author's design of discrediting the old romances, than the choice of this venerable legend, for the vehicle of his satire upon them." He adds, "the ridicule Chaucer bestowed upon them, hastened the fall of both chivalry and romance."*

The character, which truth has made it necessary to give of the old romances, will not apply to the more modern ones of Sir Philip Sidney, &c. &c. and of "Scudery dont la fertile plume, peut tous les mois sans peine, enfanter un volume." † They, however, revived the "*Old Court of Love*," and the mode of spiritualising and abstracting the passion, which had such an effect upon the manners of the French people, as has never been effaced; and if we consider the character, with regard to love, of a nation which was so very much engrossed with those subjects; ‡ we must conclude that their tendency is very unfavourable to virtue.

* Hurd's Letters on Chivalry and Romance. † Boileau.

‡ L'Academie Française traita dans ces premieres seances plusieurs sujets qui concernoient l'amour, l'on vit encore dans l'hotel de Longueville, les personnes les plus qua-

Though the form that fictitious writing has assumed within the last century, is doubtless of a very different kind from all that we have hitherto been considering, and though several causes now unite to prevent romances and novels from being so influential on manners, as in the infancy of society;—yet, when we reflect that they are in the hands of every one, without distinction of age, sex, or condition, we can scarcely avoid attributing to them a considerable degree of importance. We observe that people generally catch the manners of those they associate with; that the artisan is distinguishable from the man of fashion; and the scholar, from both—such are the effects of different associations: from the general laws of which it is not to be expected that the readers of fictitious history should be exempted: the manners of these, no doubt, are influenced by those of the imaginary society they keep, and with which they are delighted. It remains for me to seek out, if possible, how far this influence extends.

Two causes combine to diminish the influence of fictitious history: first, the present advanced state of civilisation; and, secondly, the sort of writing now denominated fictitious. With regard to the first, it is pretty certain that fiction, properly so called, can only be conceived to operate powerfully

lifiés et les plus spirituelles du siecle de Louis quatorze se disputer a qui commenteroit et raffineroit le mieux sur la delicatesse du coeur, et des sentimens, a qui feroit sur ce chapitre, les distinctions les plus subtiles.

Memoires de l'Academie des Inscriptions, Tom. xx.

upon an unenlightened, and unpolished people; and that of course, the most effectual remedy to oppose to it, is cultivation and refinement: in these the last century, has witnessed extraordinary advances, of which we need no greater proof, than the encreasing discredit into which superstitious stories have fallen; our mothers, and our aunts may remember when cows were elf-struck, and when the sudden appearance of a witch or ghost was dreaded on every occasion, but such notions make no part of the present vulgar creed; they have been buried with the dead, and would never again, perhaps, have been summoned up to light, were it not for the Gothic propensity of some of our modern writers, to rake up all the antiquated stuff of the darkest ages, as if they thought it a pity it should sink into oblivion.

A high state of civilisation is a preventive of the power of fiction, in another respect also. Commerce, and much intercourse with the world, will, by degrees, efface those strong and marked characters, by which, nations, at various periods are distinguished; and the existence of which, is essentially necessary, in order that a particular cause may act with the greatest possible energy. Thus, the spirit of war, combined with that of gallantry, formed the distinguishing features of the middle ages; whence, it is easy to be conceived, that at this period, the reading of romances would greatly inflame those passions, which we know to have been the fact; but, as an attempt to pourtray the character of the present times would be difficult indeed, so, it would be

equally difficult to conceive how any new effect could be wrought upon Europeans, by means of fiction, unless we might perhaps except the Spanish nation, which has been so recently converted by one species of fiction, from the absurdities introduced by another; taking also into account, the prejudice and ignorance which the policy of the Inquisition has obliged them to retain. With regard to the French, we know they have been always remarkable for their politeness and gallantry; we know also, that it was by the French, the romantic mode of fabling had been earliest and most cultivated; that it never was lost from among them; and that they continued superior to all other nations in that deparment of literature. Their constant reading of this kind of books is sufficient to account for that extraordinary attachment and devotedness to the fair sex, for which Frenchmen have been remarkable, beyond their neighbours, and which continued to the time of the revolution; since that period, French manners form a striking contrast to what they formerly were, and we have reason to suppose, that as the manners have been in some degree changed, so has their fondness for those compositions, by which they were cherished.

The same observation holds, with regard to individuals. Cultivation, improvement, and a desire for truth, will proportionably diminish the effects of fictitious writing. When the mind has been previously enlarged and invigorated by being exercised with truth, and by habits of thinking and

judging, the illusions of fancy may amuse for a moment, they may even sometimes transport, but they can gain no ascendency. It is therefore for the *young* and *inexperienced*, for the *ignorant* and the *idle*, that we are interested in the present enquiry. Nor is it so much to the higher classes of society that we are to look for the ill effects of fictitious history—as it cannot be supposed that much additional injury can be sustained by persons who read of follies, dissipation, or vices, with which they are perpetually conversant. It is the middle and lower classes that suffer most by publications, through the medium of which, they are introduced to manners they would otherwise have remained strangers to. If it were not for the circulating libraries of the neighbouring towns, the daughters of farmers might remain contented and happy in the humble circle of domestic enjoyment, which Providence had allotted them; but the comparison they are taught to make between their own homely occupations, and the brilliant glare of fashion's fascinating pursuits, frequently leads to the most lamentable consequences, which every day's experience too sadly proves. Hence—deluded by the seducer, who held out the hope of treading those paths which fancy had learned to delight in—the simple girl, after having forsaken her aged parents and her home, finds every thing too true that she had anticipated in the scenes of dissipation, except the ideal happiness supposed to be inseparably connected with them. Another cause which diminishes the influence of fictitious histories in the present

day is, that the *number* of them is really considerably less now than formerly—for the term, "fictitious," can scarcely, with propriety of speech, be applied to novels: "To catch the manners, living, as they rise," seems to be the principal aim of the novelist: and—though they may be productive (if I may use the expression) of fictitious consequences, by teaching the young to assume characters not their own—yet portraits of vice, or of virtue, merely, however highly coloured, can hardly be deemed fictitious, and such must the characters drawn in novels be considered; all of them—the faultless, or the "monstrum nulla virtute redemptum" excepted—having their archetypes in real life. In order then, to estimate aright the consequences arising from the universal avidity with which the innumerable swarms of novels are read, that have already issued, and are daily issuing from all the presses of Europe, we should regard them, not in the light of fictions, which, by giving false views of things, might unfit the inexperienced mind for the sober business of life, or hurry it into the vagaries of romantic enthusiasm; but of being *too faithful* transcripts of all the follies and vices of a luxurious and corrupted age; and the medium for conveying to the unwary minds, the poison of infidelity, and of contempt for whatever is truly estimable in religion or morals.

From the very extensive circulation which novels are known to have, some persons of great talents and virtue have been of opinion that they might be made of infinite use; and some have, even themselves condescended to become novel writers;

but, as their object was more to instruct than to please, or rather to make the latter entirely subservient to the former, their works are not read, or at most are only read by people of taste and information. Such is the fate of Johnson's Rasselas, and of Guadentio di Lucca, a work ascribed to one of the most illustrious philosophers;* nor will this appear surprising, when we consider that the readers of novels are usually the most illiterate part of the community. It is not to be denied that such a form of writing might be made the vehicle of wholesome moral instruction, which to a certain class of readers would not perhaps be unpalatable: but to suppose that any extensive benefit would follow from such a plan is to attribute to the generality of readers, a talent for selection and discrimination, that exclusively belongs to cultivated intellect.

It is not enough, that a novel abounds in moral sentiments; the whole story should be so constituted, as to convey an important lesson: but if every page have introduced us into the company of vicious characters; if we have been induced, in our progress through the book, to smile at vice, or to sympathise with the feelings of the libertine—can the useful moral thrown into the *last page*, or into the *last line* be able to obliterate the bad impressions of all that went before? unquestionably not.—In order, therefore, to make novels useful, care should be taken to mark vice and folly with abhorrence and contempt, and to paint with all the clearness of which language is susceptible, the disgrace and

* Bishop Berkeley.

infamy that should ever be represented as inseparable from immorality and vice—so clearly, that the most careless reader could not avoid seeing the connection. If such a rule is necessary, in order to make novels a medium of usefulness to the community, what must be the consequence, when that rule is always inverted?—which, with very few exceptions, we know to be the fact. The truth is, that emolument is the chief object about which novel writers are concerned. If this result from their works, every wish is fully gratified, and every end which had been proposed, attained.

I have, indeed, supposed it possible, that novels might be made productive of beneficial effects: but to multiply them, in the hope of such a result, I am fully of opinion, would prove a Utopian scheme; for * when the mind is much habituated to, or much conversant with fiction, however innocent or moral, it is unfitted for the reception of *historic truth*; in this exercise, the imagination alone is employed, whilst the mind or reasoning faculty remains perfectly inactive and useless.

Though it is pretty obvious that most of the evils that ensue from the constant reading of fictitious history, apply to the female, rather than to the male sex, yet, if it can ap-

* This reason will equally apply to the methods which have been latterly adopted in order to *cheat* the rising generation into learning, which is to be effected, according to the modern plan, by means of fictitious histories, which have been multiplied to an amount, which must be alarming to those that are really interested for true learning and science.

pear, that from the same source, the heart may be corrupted, the principles undermined, or the imagination defiled, then they apply equally to both sexes. Women, however, seem to be especially interested in the present enquiry, because they are more generally devoted to novel reading, than men; and because their habits of life, and education, instead of being calculated to correct the defects of a more flexible temperament, seem as if they were intended to encourage them. Hence, imagination, which, if properly regulated, would be a very great source of pleasure, becomes rather productive of misery and misfortune; and, of all the means that were ever invented, in order to strengthen the imagination, in opposition to the reasoning faculty, to weaken or destroy the moral as well as the intellectual sense, and to engender all the innumerable evils that must follow of course, novels have been most successful.

This leads me to endeavour to seek out *some* of the reasons which may be assigned in proof of the foregoing assertion. To unfold *all* their consequences, would require, indeed,

" A master's hand, and prophet's fire!"

For greater clearness, modern novels may be divided into the two classes of *humourous*, and *sentimental*. The former generally exhibit human nature in its degraded state; they attempt to paint the worst feelings of the human heart; to introduce the reader to the dregs of society, and into every haunt of vice. By means of these, the young man—" cereus

in vitium flecti," before he has yet left the paternal mansion, is fully initiated into the manners and language of hostlers, rakes, bullies, gaming tables, &c. &c.—in short, he is made to "see with the eyes" of Fielding and Smollet, many things which his own shallow observation would never perhaps have noted. The parting advice, and warning voice of affectionate parents, cannot be supposed to produce any great effects upon one who has already learned, that vice is not, either in *itself*, or its *consequences*, what their prejudices have taught them to believe: on the contrary, he is *certain* that a man's being a spendthrift, a gamester, and a debauchee, does not prevent him from being well received in society, or from obtaining the beauteous and virtuous object of his affections; and he is prepared to regard sedate manners, and cautious conduct, only as the mask which is to conceal the hypocrisy and villainy of a *Blifil*.

Every candid person must acknowledge, that this is the view of things presented by the perusal of Tom Jones; which, as it unquestionably holds the highest place amongst this species of composition, is not improperly noticed here.

The biographer of Fielding, in his observations upon that author's principal work, in the few words which he uses to describe the character of the hero, happens to point out the moral of the book, as plainly, as if he had done so intentionally. "Tom Jones," says he, "as much a libertine as he is, engages all *sensible hearts*, by his *candour*, *generosity*, *humanity*, his *gratitude* to his benefactor, his *tender compas-*

sion, and readiness to relieve the distressed." * So then, according to this writer, true libertinism is a *term* which may comprehend in it the virtues " generosity, candour, humanity, gratitude, tender compassion," &c. &c. or at least, not exclude them. This is new logic, but certainly not what Mr. Locke, or any of his disciples would countenance. It is, however, the *logic of libertinism,* and may serve to shew us the advances which the modern writers have made in the subject of Ethics. But to be serious;—is it possible that on the least reflection, any one can think that the virtues ascribed to Tom Jones could belong to, or be at all compatible with his character? I will not suppose that one " *sensible heart*" will reply to this question in the affirmative, and therefore do not hesitate to declare positively, that they *cannot?* but in doing so, I still adhere to the old-fashioned interpretation of words and things: for instance,—I consider with *Johnson,* a libertine to be " a man who lives without restraint or law, who pays no regard to the precepts of religion;" I consider libertinism and irreligion to be so closely allied, as to regard them nearly as synonymous terms; and therefore, cannot comprehend the meaning of the "*humanity,*" that is exercised in degrading and ruining that sex, of which man should be the protector and guardian; or of the "*generosity*" that " robs of that which not enriches *him,* but makes *her* poor indeed." All the other virtues, supposed not to be

* See last edition of Fielding's works, vol. i. p. 101.

excluded from the meaning of the term *libertinism*, might in the same manner be shewn to be equally incompatible with it: but perhaps it is sufficient to ask in the words of the gospel, "do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit; neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit."

On the other hand, to introduce profligate characters, for the purpose of exposing them to shame and ridicule, is a dangerous experiment. As Swift's "directions to servants" are said to have spoiled more good servants than corrected bad ones, by teaching tricks, which otherwise would not have been thought of; so, the high-coloured pictures of vice and folly drawn in novels, leave on the inexperienced mind, such copies of their reality, as the good moral of the work is but ill calculated to efface.

It is rather a curious circumstance, and worthy to be noted, that notwithstanding the manifest evil tendency of the novels of Fielding, he professes most solemnly, that "to recommend goodness, and innocence, has been his sincere desire," and he "hopes that nothing will be found in the whole course of his work, prejudicial to the cause of virtue and religion, nothing inconsistent with the strictest rules of decency, or which can offend the chastest eye on the perusal." In these his *pious desires*, as well as in the method he adopted to put them into execution, he has been followed universally by the multitude of novel writers who have succeeded him, from Marmontel, to G. M. Lewis, author of

the Monk,* and who, although they have fallen infinitely short of him in genius and talents, have certainly much surpassed him in the method of conveying sentiments of virtue and religion to inexperienced minds!

Before I take my leave of this class, I cannot help expressing some regret, that the species of fictitious history, which, as it has been employed by Cervantes, appears to be the safest, or least injurious method of entertaining by fiction, has been almost entirely occupied by writers of the basest principles, and loosest morals. For in other hands we have sometimes seen that humour may possibly be accompanied by decency and morality; that relaxation, if necessary, may be afforded to the mind, without causing debility, and amusement without depravity; and that the fancy may be delighted, without any dangerous lesson being conveyed to the heart.

In entering upon that part of the subject, which involves the consideration of sentimental novels, I am so impressed with the conviction of the numerous evils that result from them, that I am led to say, in the words of Tasso, to those who have as yet escaped from their dangerous influence,

" Guarda, che mal fato,
O giuvenal vaghezza, non ti meni
Al magazino de le ciancie, ah fuggi!
Fuggi quel' incantato allogiamento.
Quivi habitan le Maghe, che incantando
Far traveder; e traudir ciascuno."

* See particularly in proof of this, " Pursuits of Literature," Dial. iv, p. 240.

To place every thing that is important in a wrong point of view; to corrupt the taste, and undermine the morals, is the business of these *enchanters*, in which, under pretence of doing the reverse, they have been, unhappily, most successful. At first sight indeed, it is not easy to discover, that false views of life and manners are presented, when the professed object is to paint them with accuracy; that the taste can be corrupted by writers versed in polite literature, and who all aim at expressing their thoughts in language the most pathetic or sublime; or that the morals can be undermined by not only cherishing the tender and sentimental affections, but working them up to a degree of the most exquisite sensibility.—Paradoxical as all this may appear to some, it is nevertheless true, nor can any solitary instance which may be adduced to prove the contrary, weaken the evidence of countless multitudes. Even Richardson himself, who was more anxious to inculcate principles of morality than most of his imitators, might plead guilty to this indictment; for in Clarissa, and Pamela, he has not only placed his principal characters in situations the most improbable, and unnatural, but in doing so, has unfolded scenes, totally inconsistent with morality, or even with common decency; and has given such a degree of importance to vice, by making it the whole aim and occupation of his male characters—the business in which ingenuity, talents, and money are all employed and consumed as can hardly fail to make an impression upon youthful fancies, unfavourable to virtue. In the love of

Pamela for the abandoned seducer, there is something greatly repugnant to delicacy, besides its being a precedent, which in some degree authorises a virtuous young woman to hold a parley with a seducer, an incident which has been greatly improved upon in the more modern novels.

But after all these objections, and many more that might be urged, perhaps there is more danger to be apprehended from many writers, who have taken care to avoid all appearance of grossness, or indelicacy, but who, (in the words of an excellent writer,) * " have made the least refined affections of humanity lose their indelicate nature in the eyes of many, when dignified by the epithet of *sentimental*, and have made a softened appellation give a gracefulness to moral deformity."

There is not any more natural way of accounting for the greatly increased multiplication of those *trials* that are the disgrace of our daily newspapers, than the light manner in which the breach of the seventh commandment is treated in novels; considered in this point of view, the *Julies*, and *Delphines* of France, have already afforded to the moralist subjects for animadversion; and even one of our own country women has thought proper to make the hero of her tale, (who is the person for whose feelings, and affections, the young, the tender, and perhaps the virtuous, are to be interested, and to sympathise with,) guilty of a *crime*, in

* Vicesimus Knox.

many countries subject to the punishment of a cruel death, and which is, in *all*, attended with infamy.

Since then, a novel is *the only place*, where the violator of the most sacred laws of God, and of his country can boast, in levity of language, and jocularity of spirit, of his "deeds in levity of language and jocularity of spirit, and where his father, whilst he mildly blames him for what he would term indiscretions, can remind him of his "innate rectitude" and of his "splendid virtues;" I would earnestly wish, that they, whose manners are yet uncontaminated, would look with a jealous, and guarded eye, upon what are apparently so inviting—"Latet Anguis in herbâ."

But it is not the levity, merely, with which these breaches of the moral law are treated, that should make novels be regarded as tending to encrease the corruption of manners:—*false ideas* respecting all those things in which consist the true happiness and honour of a woman, are to be drawn from them. The man who is so fortunate as to enjoy the luxury of finding his home always peaceful and happy, will be best able to judge whether the qualities that make the greatest figure in the world, or excite the most admiration and notice, are really the most valuable, or are what have chiefly contributed to make his situation enviable. *He* will undoubtedly judge the contrary to be true; but it can hardly be expected, that any girl, who has been much addicted to novel reading, will cordially agree with him in this opinion: for *her* heroines are never suffered to appear without making

conquests, or without receiving the perpetual incense of flattery: they are ever to be found in ball-rooms, and at masquerades, where they, of course, meet with the most excellent, superlatively wise, and accomplished husbands, whom, notwithstanding, these discerning fair-ones do not unfrequently select from a knot of illiterate rakes. Nor should we forget the uncommon share of personal beauty, that seldom fails to accompany their other perfections, which, beside teaching a young lady to set an immoderate value upon it, causes her to form in her mind inseparable associations between personal graces and moral and intellectual endowments—associations which are as likely to be injurious to happiness and good morals, as they are inconsistent with truth and experience.*

Many other evils arising from fictitious history (considered in this point of view) might be enumerated, but as they have been already touched upon by so able and elegant a writer as Professor Stewart, I will content myself, for the most part, with referring to his chapters "on the influence of imagination upon human character and happiness,"† but shall be

* How very different in this respect, the impression is, which authentic, and fictitious history is calculated to produce, may be agreeably illustrated by a reference to Lord Clarendon's History of his own Life, vol. i. and iii. where, in the character of Lord Falkland, he has finely contrasted the disadvantages of his person with the excellencies of his mind; and in that of Sir Charles Cavendish, he has afforded a lesson, admirably calculated to counteract the prejudices in favour of these false associations.

† Philosophy of the human mind.

excused for adopting his words here, in order to shew that the mind which has been accustomed to high wrought scenes of distress, and which is made "tremblingly alive" to the representation of fictitious sorrows, will be incapable of affording that useful and active sympathy, which it is necessary to exert, in order to relieve the less shining miseries of real life. "Exhibitions of fictitious distress tend to strengthen those passive impressions which counteract beneficence. The scenes into which the novelist introduces us, are, in general, perfectly unlike those which occur in the world. As his object is to please, he removes from his descriptions every circumstance that is disgusting, and presents us with histories of elegant and dignified distress. It is not such scenes that human life exhibits. We have to act with the mean, the illiterate, the vulgar, and the profligate. The perusal of fictitious history has a tendency to encrease that disgust which we naturally feel at the concomitants of distress, and to cultivate a false refinement of taste, inconsistent with our condition, as members of society;—nay, it is possible for this refinement to be carried so far, as to withdraw a man from the duties of life, and even from the sight of those distresses which he might alleviate; and accordingly many are to be found, who, if the situations of romance were realised, would not fail to display the virtues of their favourite characters, whose sense of duty is not sufficiently strong to engage them in the humble and private scenes of human misery."

It may appear strange to some, that amongst all the ills which are supposed to result from novels, I have omitted the mention of *romantic love*, the subject with which they all *begin*, *proceed*, and *end*. The truth is, I have not forgotten it, but I have been obliged to remember that it is the effect of fictitious history upon *modern manners*, I am desirous to elicit: upon which *love*, if he were to appear in his own shape, or under the more attractive form *of his mother*, would find that he had lost his power: and would be obliged to assume the semblance of old Plutus, or of the blind goddess, before his arrows (though sharpened upon the most bloody whetstone) could be able to produce a single scar.

Although much more might be offered upon this subject, yet from what has been said, I believe it is pretty clear that novels hold no trifling rank among the various sources to which the acknowledged corruption of modern manners might be ascribed. With respect to the consideration whether they affect the taste and literature of the times, It is obvious, that for the most part, an intoxicating spirit of levity, and an excessive love of ornament, have in modern compositions, occupied the place of sound judgment and classical purity; and that the desire after novelty usually prevails over every other consideration. Hence, the modern poet disdains those rules of art, that have for so many ages given strength and stability to the productions of genius; and hence, even the historic page assumes a form assimilated to fiction, or actually partaking of it. To ascribe all this to the multiplication of

fictitious history, would be going rather too far, as the true cause must be sought in the excessive refinement and luxury of the times.

But if it be granted, that fictitious history—,a species of composition which has been occupied by writers of various denominations often ignorant and often depraved; a species of composition calculated to interest the imagination, engage the sympathy, and stimulate the passions of youth, at that period of life, which generally decides the moral and literary character; if it be granted that it has contributed to the corruption of morals, then, the connection is so close between them, that no farther argument can be required to prove that they equally affect taste and manners.

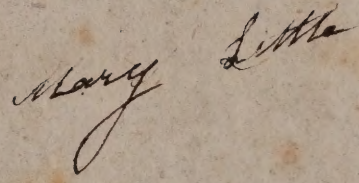
I am well aware that it may be deemed illiberal to lay so heavy a charge against a species of writing which has employed the pens of many persons of talents and of taste, as well as of those that have no pretensions to either; and undoubtedly it would be so, if the number of the former bore any reasonable proportion to that of the latter: but where a few names may be brought forward, who have expressed the inspirations of nature, in propriety of language, innumerable are they that have done outrage to truth and decorum, or else have mingled with their talents, qualities, which have only served to render them more dangerous. How small is the number of those that have been able or willing to discriminate the exact boundaries, beyond which (however trifling

the distance) *wit* degenerates into licentiousness; *reason* and *propriety* into extravagance.

But enough has been said by *me* upon this subject. I would wish, however, before I take my leave of it entirely, to suggest what appears to be the most likely means of correcting these evils. It is, to give our youth, of both sexes, a virtuous and religious education; to make *truth* the prime object of all their pursuits; to direct their views to *realities* instead of *shadows*; to engage them in those studies which have a tendency to enlarge and elevate the mind, and strengthen and rectify the judgment as well as to purify the taste; which accustoms the mind to habits of industry and labour, and gives in return a pleasure, far more exquisite than that which is the meed of idleness or indolence.

In these times, pains have been taken by the *learned*, to remove all difficulties out of the way of the *learner*, and to prevent in future, the necessity on his part, of any great exertions for the attainment of knowledge: but whilst it is to be doubted, whether this mode of *making learning easy* will eventually encrease the number of *good scholars*, some beneficial consequences, may, it is hoped, follow from what entirely does away the necessity of any extraordinary means, in order to relax the mind after severe and intense application—the excuse which is offered by many, who indulge themselves in the free perusal of fictitious history.

—Nugæ seria ducent in mala.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